

Testimony of Dr. Sonia Alconini
On Behalf of the Society for American Archaeology
Before the Department of State, Cultural Property Advisory Committee
Regarding the Proposed Renewal of the Bilateral Agreement Between the
Plurinational State of Bolivia and the United States of America

May 9, 2016

Chairwoman Gerstenblith and members of the committee, my name is Dr. Sonia Alconini, and I am submitting this testimony on behalf of myself and the Society for American Archaeology (SAA). I am writing this testimony to support the renovation of the bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Bolivia and the United States, aimed to ensure the illegal import of Bolivia's cultural heritage.

I am Associate professor of Anthropology at the University of Texas at San Antonio, and Research Affiliate at the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas y Arqueológicas (INAA), Universidad Mayor de San Francisco Xavier. I am also member of the Society for American Anthropology. Born in Bolivia, I have conducted archaeological research in different regions of this country for over thirty years. This includes investigations in the eastern valleys and tropics in order to assess the nature of the ancient Inka frontiers, and the varying forms of control and interaction that the Inka Empire maintained with a myriad of indigenous population. This work was done in coordination with colleagues, institutions and universities from the US and Bolivia, thanks to the support of the NSF and other funding agencies. As a result of this collaborative effort I have published five books, and nearly forty articles and book chapters.

The Society of American Archaeology (SAA) is an international organization founded in 1934, and whose main focus is to promote the research, interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage in the Americas. With more than 6,900 members, the SAA represents professional archaeologist working in US universities, colleges, museums, government agencies and the private sector, and includes members from different countries around the world.

Bolivia has an extremely rich history and cultural patrimony. In the pre-Columbian era, it was the home of complex sociopolitical developments that influenced the region and beyond. This was the case of the pristine state of Tiwanaku in the Titicaca basin (A.D. 400-1000). With one of the earliest urban centers in the Americas, the capital of Tiwanaku comprised finely elaborate pyramidal terraces, sunken temples and large plazas made with finely cut stone blocks, and was surrounded by neighborhoods with varying levels of ethnic affiliation and economic specialization. Using different mechanisms, this state expanded over a sizable area of the Central and Southern Andes. Later, the Titicaca lake became a sacred pilgrimage center and origin place (*pacarina*) for the emerging rulers of the Inka Empire (A.D. 1400-1532). During this time Bolivia was part of the Collasuyu, one of the wealthiest quarters of this polity. It comprised a series of Inka provinces, imperial centers and a unique road system with warehouses and resting *tampu* stations. Among these stand out those in the Island of the Sun (La Paz), core of an Inka-sponsored pilgrimage network, Samaipata a frontier Inka center on the eastern tropics with a massive carved *ushnu* outcrop (Santa Cruz), and Inkallajta, conceived as one of the "Seven Cuzcos" (Cochabamba). Given their importance it is no surprise that many of these sites are part

of the UNESCO's World Heritage List. This is the case of Tiwanaku, Samaipata, Inkallajta and the royal Inka road (Qhapaq Ñan). Although less research was done in other parts of Bolivia, recent investigations in the tropical plains of Beni and Pando have revealed the development of sophisticated agrarian and hydraulic systems of significant extension. The intermediate valleys and adjacent tropical savannas have a number of cultural developments yet to be studied. In the Colonial era, Bolivia had a singular importance considering the exploitation of the silver mine of Potosí, and the establishment of the Royal Audience of Charcas in Sucre.

The rich cultural developments in Bolivia have attracted the attention of looters and grave robbers since antiquity. To alleviate this situation, the Bolivian government has issued a set of laws to preserve the cultural heritage, to prevent its illicit traffic, and to protect the archaeological sites and associated artwork. At least ten laws and supreme decrees have been issued, although they range in scope or focus. In 2010, the Law of Autonomies and Decentralization has delegated part of these responsibilities to a number of departmental and provincial municipalities.

In addition, different universities have implemented educational programs to train archaeologists and conservators in the region. This is the case of the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés, and the department of anthropology and archaeology founded in 1984. As the first of its kind, this academic unit has produced over 70 professionals. It also houses the Institute of Anthropological and Archaeological Investigations. Similarly, the Universidad Mayor de San Simón through the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas y Museo Arqueológico (INIAM) in Cochabamba, has created two years ago a post-graduate course in museum studies. These universities are not alone. The national universities in Chuquisaca and Santa Cruz (Universidad San Francisco Xavier and Universidad Gabriel René Moreno respectively) both have museums, and currently sponsor research projects done by both national and international scholars. The Universidad Autónoma del Beni has also plans to open an archaeology department. All these educational efforts have crystallized in different ways. First, one sees the professionalization of archaeology, including more concerted efforts to investigate, preserve and protect the cultural heritage. Second, there is a growth in the number of publications in archaeology and colonial history. Third, as in my situation, many Bolivian scholars have received post-graduate training in the US and Europe; situation that contributed to the growth Bolivian academia. Third, Bolivia in the last years has become the home of a set of international educational events. This is the case of the 8th Congress of Archaeological Theory in South America (TAAS) to be celebrated this May, the International Congress of Rock Art done in the past years, and the annual multidisciplinary meetings sponsored by the Association of Bolivian Studies (AEB) in Sucre.

Despite these improvements, the Bolivian cultural patrimony remains under constant threat. The construction of infrastructure like roads, gas exploitation efforts, or the expansion of new colonies into the tropical forest is all contributing factors. One example was the situation of the ancient Guarani cemetery of Inkahuasi, partially destroyed two years ago by bulldozers during the installation of a gas pipe (Santa Cruz). Recently, the ancient Inka road in Takesi in the tropical Yunga mountains was partially destroyed (La Paz). Last year, the construction of the

cable railway system in La Paz capital city, has revealed that many neighborhoods like Miraflores or Llojeta were built over ancient Tiwanaku occupations.

Added to this is the illegal traffic in cultural materials from the pre-Columbian, Colonial and Early Republican eras. Although it is hard to track the intensity, nature and scope of these activities, some examples are revealing. In January of 2013, the Bolivian newspaper La Razon reported that between 1997 and 2013, the Unit of Patrimony of the Ministry of Cultures recorded at least 89 smuggling cases, all related to the disappearance of 1,276 pieces of artworks made in different media ([http://www.la-razon.com/suplementos/informe/Mafias-trafican-piezas-prehispanicas_0_1759024200.html%20\(14/01/2013\)](http://www.la-razon.com/suplementos/informe/Mafias-trafican-piezas-prehispanicas_0_1759024200.html%20(14/01/2013)))ⁱ. Among these stand out the robbery of religious colonial paintings and sacred paraphernalia from a number of highland churches in Ocobaya, Quaquí, Copacabana, Ayo Ayo and Caquingora, including the one in San Pedro, La Paz city. This is also the case of Tiwanaku polychrome ceramics, metal and stone artifacts sold illegally by the local Tiwanaku residents. As explained by this newspaper, this is not an isolated case, but rather, these agents are part of a broader network of dealers linked to private collectors in the international market.

One market for these items is the US. Although the statistics are limited, a quick analysis of EBay and similar online services is illuminating. As I write this report, two US dealers have posted in EBay two open bowls from the intermediate southern Bolivian valleys (perhaps Yampara), and three Huruquilla style vessels from Potosí and Chuquisaca. Considering that the Bolivian laws establish that the cultural patrimony belongs to the state as the main guardian, it is likely that these objects were sent to the US illegally.

In this context, the US national borders became a critical interface to ensure that pre-Columbian Colonial and early Republican artwork do not enter the country unlawfully. Therefore, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the US and Bolivia becomes a critical legal instrument that make these efforts possible. If identified, US border agents are authorized to inspect, stop, document and return these materials to their country of origin. To sum up, the MOU with Bolivia has been successful at different levels, although more work remains to be done. First, it has contributed to minimize the illegal import of Bolivian cultural patrimony. Second, it has promoted bilateral efforts to protect, conserve and study the pre-Columbian heritage. Third, it has contributed to the construction of a stronger international coalition lead by the UNESCO to safeguard these materials. Altogether, ***I strongly recommend and urge the renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding between the US and Bolivia*** to continue with these efforts.

ⁱ Additional online source: <http://arqueologiamericana.blogspot.com/search/label/Bol%C3%ADvia>